



COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA

Department of Veterans Services

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Commissioner

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Virginia Department of Veterans Services Update for the Board of Veterans Services

December 17, 2020

VDVS continues to provide nearly its full range of services through a mix of remote/virtual methods (when possible) with face-to-face appointments.

We continue to experience lower numbers of veterans visiting our offices to file disability claims. Even though veterans are making contact with us through mail, email, and phone calls, the number of claims and documents submitted to the VA are down by about 35% this fiscal year. From our interactions with veterans, this data represents: a) some veterans choosing not to visit our offices; b) some veterans choosing not to mail documents to us; and, c) overall veterans' reduced access and desire to visit medical facilities to obtain evidence for claims.

We started using an online appointment tool in September and we have had over 900 appointment requests since rolling it out.

VVFS new client services are down 22%; however, services for current clients are up 305%, as they are tending to require more intensive services. Behavioral health services that generate new clients are highly dependent on community presence, and that has been a challenge since March 2020.

We have not seen a big uptick in homelessness, but we anticipate more veteran housing issues once the CDC eviction moratorium expires at the end of the year. Also, funding influxes to Supportive Services for Veterans Families (SSVF) through CARES Act allocations seem to have temporarily staved off evictions.

Military Cultural Competency Training continues to be successful. The VISR pilot concluded; one key metric from that very successful pilot: of the 2300+ SMVF screened by providers from Feb-Aug 2020 (the period for the pilot program), screeners found 30% of them at risk for suicide. The next step is to begin expanding the program and training, especially lethal means and military cultural training.

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Interments at our cemeteries have increased; anecdotally, many of them are COVID-related. The expansion project at Amelia will commence in early-to-mid January 2021.

Last month, I updated you on the COVID outbreaks at both veterans care centers (VCC). Through great work by VCC staff and with some help from the VA, we have since contained the virus. We have not lost any additional veterans to COVID since the 2nd week of November. Currently we have no residents with COVID; we have one staff with COVID at VVCC and three staff with COVID at SBVCC. Census is down substantially (SBVCC: 75%; VVCC: 64% - nursing home/79% - domiciliary) and we are gradually pursuing admissions.

Construction on both new care centers continues with no major delays. Opening is scheduled for March 2022 and August 2022 for Puller VCC, and Jones and Cabacoy VCC, respectively. We will start hiring eight months prior to the opening dates.

We have continued a robust program of transition services through V3 and VTAP. V3 employers have hired over 10,000 veterans this CY and VTAP has reached almost 33,000 transitioning service members through multiple outreach venues. VTAP inquiries are up 63%, but services are down 11%. Not being on base due to COVID is reducing the number of veterans we are serving; however we have continued virtual hiring fairs in cooperation with the Virginia Chamber of Commerce. In addition, we participate in a program called Exec Vets Connect in which the Military and Veterans Affairs Committee of the Virginia Chamber of Commerce hosts a panel to address senior Transitioning Service Members' questions. In a sign that fellowships continue to be important, Hire Vets Now fellowship inquiries are up 285%; we have 13% more TSMs in the HVNFP pipeline and we have 50% more employers.

Our State Approving Agency and Virginia Military Spouse and Dependents Education Program (VMSDEP) are going strong. We do not expect issues meeting our contractual requirements for compliance surveys this Federal Fiscal Year and the number of VMSDEP applications is steady.

The Women Veterans Program increased the number of veterans engaged by 21%; the program has also seen 50% more partner referrals over last year. We are connected with the US Department of Veterans Affairs Women Veteran Program and are planning for our next Women Veterans Virtual Summit in June.

At the Virginia War Memorial, the number of visitors is down this year. However, the virtual educational opportunities are expansive and we regularly present interesting and pertinent content. Unfortunately, we recently closed the interior portions of the War Memorial to the public for several days due to a COVID case there.

We realize that COVID-19 will present challenges for the agency in 2021. Below are items that need regular attention:

- Safety of clients and staff while providing in-person services;
- PPE expenditures are substantial and require detailed budget planning;
- Veterans' awareness of our services: we are a need-based organization and if veterans are not aware of us, we cannot meet their need.

- Because of COVID, we are not in the common physical spaces where veterans and their families normally reside. This makes our outreach efforts more labor intensive as we try to create word of mouth through phone calls, virtual sessions, and emails.

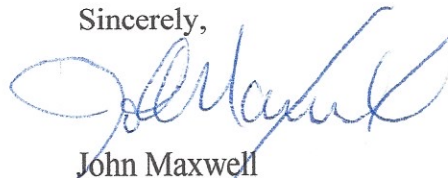
While we work to deliver our services to the best of our ability, below are our priorities for calendar year 2021:

- Safely and effectively delivering our services to our clients;
- Creating an inclusive environment that results in high quality of work, opportunities for professional development, and balance for VDVS teammates
 - o We will begin a professional development program within the agency;
 - o Continue to build on a culture that sees our actions and activities through a lens of equity, diversity, and inclusion.
- Prepare VDVS for short-term (1 year) and long-term (2-5 years) provision of services
 - o Position VDVS to be a primary point of entry for Virginia's veterans and families, so they can connect to federal, state, and community resources.
 - o Revise our Compact with Virginia's veterans so that the agency remains focused on meeting the near and long-term needs of veterans and families who call Virginia home;
 - o Improve accessibility so that all Virginia veterans can use our services if desired;
 - o Continue to build partnerships that improve services for Virginia's veterans and families;
 - o Ensure we can absorb additional budget perturbations that may rise due to COVID 19.

The Virginia Department of Veterans Services remains committed to Virginia's veterans and their families. We look forward to working with the Board of Veterans Services and other partners to find ways to enhance our services and their delivery.

Best wishes for a safe and enjoyable holiday season.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "John Maxwell", is written over a horizontal line.

John Maxwell